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# Employing Dramatic Elements in Contextually-situated Interaction for Enhancing Speaking Proficiency: Drama in L2 Learning

Chikahide Komura

## Abstract

As one of the classroom activities in communicative approaches to second language acquisition (SLA), role play assists the language learners to reinforce their understanding of grammatical forms in their pragmatic context, but it often confuses them while constructing utterances for verbal interaction because they do not seem to have self-generated speech intent to convey their messages. To alter this situation, language teachers try to provide them with predetermined leads to create sentences for successful engagement in oral communication. However, text-structured role play with instructional guidance does not seem to develop learners' potentials to be able to present what they want to say in an interaction but rather confirms their understanding of mechanical transformation - converting the grammatical forms into sentences. Retention of understanding the practical use of grammatical forms may be disappointing because there is no self-generated communication taking place. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how effectively the concept of dramatic element from Stanislavski's "Method" acting solves the problem — encouraging language learners to generate their speech intent in role play. This paper emphasizes the importance of creating conflicts during the interactive process of role play, with which learners can develop their negotiating skills for exchanging messages in oral communication by applying "Method" acting techniques while in their role plays.

**Keywords:** role play, total situation, "Method" acting, Vygotsky, illocutionary force

## 1. Introduction

In communicative approaches to second language acquisition, it is often acknowledged that there are certain pedagogical sets of classroom activities for enhancing speaking proficiency. For example, one of the typical sequences in Japanese as a second language (JSL) class includes "grammar explanation," "mechanical drills," "contextualized drills," "pair work," and "role play" in this order (Kawaguchi & Yokomizo, 2005, p. 98). Role play is placed at the

final stage of the sequence to facilitate native-like speaking proficiency.

Role play is often practiced in JSL class after an explanation of specific grammatical forms of the target language. The grammatical forms are presented at the beginning of the sequence so that the learners are prepared to participate in their role plays after various kinds of speaking drills. The basic concept of role play is that a language learner pretends to be someone else, playing a role in an imaginary situation and engages in verbal interaction with others in a certain context. It is certain that role play assists language learners to reinforce their understanding of grammatical forms in its pragmatic context. For example, a student plays a role of a waiter/waitress who is serving another student who plays a role of a customer at an imaginary restaurant. To enhance their speaking proficiency utilizing one of the basic Japanese grammatical forms, “-tai (would like to do)”, in its pragmatic context, the students try to start their conversation including the grammatical form, which is supposed to occur appropriately at the restaurant. However, the students seem to display a certain lack of ability to construct utterances for verbal interaction because they do not seem to have the self-generated speech intent to convey their messages in the interaction. The emphasis tends to be on the accuracy of the grammatical forms that are being used rather than on the meaning that is being conveyed (Kao & O'Neill, 1998).

To alter the circumstance, teachers provide them with predetermined leads for creating sentences, such as the beginnings of exchanges, so that they may successfully engage in oral communication. However, role plays with such instructional guidance in scripts do not seem to develop learners' potential to be able to present what they want to say in interaction but rather confirm their understanding of mechanical transformation converting the grammatical forms into sentences. On the other hand, without such instructional assists, students tend to remain silent wondering what to say without a clue about how to initiate their conversation in their role plays. Teachers often face some difficulty in deciding how much they should provide their students with pedagogical guidance to enhance their speaking proficiency in role play.

To remove the difficulty, teachers should try to adopt dramatic elements from acting as a pedagogical instrument in role play in language class. It is important to establish a new approach to role play that encourages language learners to engage in negotiations of meanings, focusing on how their speech intent (messages that they want to convey) is to be presented in the interaction. Stanislavski's “Method” acting (1937) for building characters provides an important insight into creating speech intent. Like actors using “Method” acting (techniques to encourage actors to build cognitive and emotional understanding of their roles), students in

language class pretend to be characters in role plays and try to convey messages in oral communication. It is important to create conflicts during the interactive process of role plays so that students develop their negotiating skills to have an exchange in oral communication by becoming empathetic toward the characters that they are portraying. Section 2 discusses the effectiveness of the concept of dramatic element from “Method” acting that allows language learners to actively participate in role play. Section 3 stresses the importance of creating conflicts in improvisational scripts which trigger negotiations of meaning in interaction. Language learners generate their speech intent to convey their messages. Section 4 provides a model of a role play from my JSL class to illustrate how conflicts in contextually-situated interaction can facilitate students’ speaking proficiency.

## 2. Using the concept of dramatic element from “Method” acting for language learning

### 2.1 Similarity between actors and language learners

One topic of discussion among language teachers of SLA classes has been how the dramatic elements of everyday activities can be utilized for facilitating speaking proficiency for their students (Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002; Maley & Duff, 2000; Smith, 1984; Winston, 2012). One activity in communicative approaches to language learning involves role play as a pedagogical instrument. Bringing role play into language learning provides students with opportunities to play roles in imaginary situations, pretending to be someone else. In drama, on the other hand, actors prepare to become characters that have roles in dramatic performance.

Focusing on the similarity between drama actors and language learners, Smith (1984) points out that:

Most fundamentally, actors and language learners share common *goals*, the most important being effective “performance,” that is, communicating the intended appropriate message. In order to communicate, actors, like language learners, have to be able to do three things:

1. They have to be able to decide what they want to communicate, i.e., what is appropriate for the given situation?
2. They must then decide how to communicate that message.
3. Finally they must have the flexibility to implement their decisions, or in other words, they must be able to *perform with competence*. This is perhaps the most difficult task of all. (p. 2, italics original)

It is important to note that both actors and language learners should have messages that they want to convey in oral communication. In the course of the interactive exchanges in role play, language learners should try to present what they want to convey and decide how to convey it with the appropriate linguistic competence.

## 2.2 Total situation

To illustrate the characteristics of the shared strategies that dramatic actors and language learners possess, Maley & Duff (2000) discuss the surroundings in which speech production occurs during the course of interaction. They named them “total situation.” The “total situation” is not a sheer physical setting, but it consists of three dramatic elements:

### (1) Setting

“This is the physical environment.” (p. 10). It is necessary to clarify the physical characteristics of surroundings in which language learners engage in their verbal exchanges. The physical characteristics of the situation exert various effects on what the learners want to say in role play regulated by the needs and the restrictions embedded in the surroundings. In connection to language learning, Boudreault (2010) points out that “the artificial world of the classroom can be transformed into a quasi-real language situation and provides an endless amount of opportunities for students’ personal growth” (p. 1). The students develop their speaking potential by engaging in oral communication in a quasi-real situation.

### (2) Role and status

It is mandatory to define the characters that language learners pretend to be. They impersonate the characters - taking parts in their verbal interactions and recognizing the surrounding characters in role plays to whom they want to convey their messages. Stanislavski, a director of the Moscow Art Theatre, stressed the importance of building real characteristics into imaginary characters in plays (1937). His acting theory, “Method” acting, gives an important insight into how language learners can build speech intent to initiate their verbal interactions in role plays.

The process of building a character requires not only information related to personal backgrounds and dispositions but also information regarding what the actors want to obtain through their verbal interactions (objective of the speech intent). Stanislavski’s term, “objective”, refers to what a character wants to acquire through each deliberation in interaction (a temporary goal), while “super objective” tells what a character wants to achieve throughout the whole conversation (the underlying goal) (1961, p. 77). It is important to define the “objective” in the flow of the conversation because the “objective” often reveals the characters’ thoughts

and desires that elicit their verbal exchanges. The underlying objective of their speech intent is often hidden between the lines as a “subtext”. Stanislavski insisted that actors should recreate the “subtext” of each line in the process of a building a character (Miller, 2011, p. 191).

### (3) Mood, attitude and feeling

In addition to setting up an “objective”, it is necessary to determine how to present it during the process of verbal interaction. In his “Method” acting, Stanislavski stressed the importance of affective and volitional tendencies to formulate “subtext” in interaction (Miller, 2011). Smith (1984) points out that “Method acting involves establishing the true emotions and motivations of a character, then producing those emotions truthfully, that is, really creating those emotions inside — feeling them as you are acting them.” (p. 13) “Total situation” (Maley & Duff, 2000) includes the emotional and motivational characteristics of the character.

For language learners in JSL class, it becomes necessary to set up a “total situation” in role play because they should present what they want to say (“objective”) during the interactive process of exchanging messages. “Method” acting certainly provides important information for creating speech intent in role play. Without the speech intent of conveying messages, language learners’ verbal exchanges will become a sheer recitation of text-structured scripts which do not require them to reveal their “subtext.” Without reflecting on their internal meanings, their conversation is filled with vacant words (Smith, 1984). The practice of speaking with these vacant words in the classroom often results in the failure of utilizing the grammatical forms in pragmatic contexts.

The utmost goal of carrying out role play in JSL class is to encourage language learners to participate in their negotiations of meaning trying to obtain their “objectives” through their verbal interactions, not to practice the sheer transformation of grammatical forms into sentences (Komura, 2014). The sheer transformation does not seem to encourage language learners to compose illocutionary forces in utterances when they participate in role play. The important thing for them in role play is to learn how to convey what they want to say in interaction utilizing appropriate linguistic competence to form grammatical structures in their concrete use (Even, 2008).

## 3. Creating conflicts in contextually-situated dialogues

### 3.1 What is the difference between “dialogue” and “conversation”?

To analyze language communication, Malinowski (1923) pointed out that “language is

embedded within a context of situation and that the situation in which utterances are made cannot be ignored” (cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 209). He reinforced the importance of analyzing language communication which occurs in its situational context. Language learners should learn how to cope with contextually-situated discourse activities. For example, Hirata (2012) discussed the illocutionary force in an utterance when a speaker says, “Let’s go bowling,” in various situations. He proposed to examine what the speaker really wants to say by making the invitational remark. Does the speaker really want to go bowling or does the speaker want to do something else on the occasion of going out for bowling? The speaker may want to propose marriage to a woman while playing bowling together. The illocutionary force in the utterance in its concrete use differs according to the situational context in which the interaction takes place. In other words, “Let’s go bowling” can obtain its illocutionary force only because of the situational context in which it is uttered and not because of its linguistic properties.

Hirata (2015) encourages an analysis of language communication based on the illocutionary forces. It is important to note that illocutionary force in an utterance can be revealed only when the speakers have an exchange and negotiate the meanings in interaction. Illocutionary forces in utterances are generated when there is some degree of tension when the speakers want to convey their messages. When the speakers make statements of already known facts or comments of mutually understood information in the course of conversation, it can hardly make the speakers create their illocutionary force as an attempt to convey messages. In this sense, role play should be practiced in the course of dialogue in which speakers generate their illocutionary forces in their utterances by having exchanges. Hirata (2012) stressed the difference between dialogue and conversation in terms of the existence of conflicts and exchanging information. Dialogue is a place where speakers are triggered to create illocutionary force through conflict, while conversation is a place where mutually known speakers simply perform their turns to deliver information.

Conflicts in verbal exchanges are a key to understanding the reason why role play can provides language learners with an opportunity to create an illocutionary force in interaction. The creation of speech intent in dialogue helps language learners to actively participate in verbal exchanges and to enhance their speaking proficiency.

### 3.2 Vygotsky’s “object” “others” and “self” regulations

In association with a goal of enhancing speaking proficiency in role play, Kao & O’Neill (1998) discussed communication strategies based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) of

mind. Vygotsky (1978) postulated that human mental functioning emerges in social interaction with others. Based on this socio-genetic notion of mental functioning, human action and thinking are mediated by socio-culturally constructed tools (technical tools) and signs (psychological tools). Such mediational tools do not shape human action and thinking directly but change the process of higher mental functioning. Trying to articulate the relationship between mental functioning and sociocultural context, Vygotsky emphasized language (a sign system) as the primary tool for mediating human action and thinking.

Taking into account the socio-genetic mental functioning, Vygotsky (1978) claims that:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (p. 57)

Citing this connection, researchers tried to demonstrate how language learners acquire a second language (L2) in the Vygotskian scheme of transformation from interpsychological (between individuals) to intrapsychological (inside individuals) planes (Johnson, 2004; Kozulin 2003; Lantolf & Thorne 2006; Yoon & Kim, 2012).

It is necessary to clarify how an individual speaker in role play internalizes his or her voices in interaction. To illustrate how communication strategies are articulated in contextually-situated interaction, Vygotsky (1978) proposed three types of regulations starting from "object", "others", to "self". Kao & O'Neill (1998) remarked that "an object-regulated speaker is one whose discourse is strongly constrained by the rules and conventions of the language in use" (p. 45). This is a stage on which language learners tend to focus on mechanical transformation of linguistic information into sentences and do not seem to develop their potential in order to present what they want to say in interaction. The emphasis in this stage is on the accuracy of the language rather than on the meaning that is being conveyed. The speaker's attention is placed only on the task of transforming the linguistic information into sentences. At this stage, the speaker is object-regulated.

Moving on to the next stage, the speaker comes to realize how to carry out the task under the guidance of another speaker in role play. The speaker participates in the interaction and tries to carry out the task of conversing utterances in exchanging turns in the chain of conversation. The speaker's utterances seem to be facilitated by another speaker's metacognitive advances in the interaction. The verbal performance of an others-regulated speaker is directed



by another person involved in interaction. At this stage, the speaker is others-regulated. Finally, the speaker starts controlling his or her own metacognitive strategies to present speech intent to say what he or she wants to say. The speaker's independent strategic function is provoked in the interaction of the role play. At this stage, the speaker is self-regulated (Yoshida, 2009). Atkinson (2002) pointed out, "There is thus a gradual process of internalization whereby a fully externalized social practice becomes a substantially internalized cognitive practice." (p. 537)

Central to this account of internalization from inter- to intra- psychological function are studies investigating the role of interaction in verbal exchanges. In the inter- to intra-transformation, speaking proficiency is enhanced in the internalization process in which interpersonal function occurs first and intrapersonal function follows. Focusing on the characteristics of the socio-genetic mental functioning for speaking proficiency, it is important to note that role play can provide language learners with opportunities in which they are able to exchange the verbal thoughts that emerge during social interactions.

#### 4. A model of role play in JSL class

In the following model of role play in JSL class, students were assigned imaginary characters who were encouraged to speak one another in Japanese honorifics<sup>1)</sup>. The teacher utilized the concept of dramatic element from "Method" acting and established the total situation in the role play for the purpose of enhancing the students' speaking proficiency. The students acknowledged the importance of honorifics in order to show respect for their speaking partners in oral communication in the context of Japanese society. Prior to the practice of the role play, the teacher provided them with a grammatical explanation illustrating how to make honorific forms. The goal of the role play was to help the students to generate their own speech intent and produce Japanese honorifics in their pragmatic contexts.

The total situation in the role play included:

##### (1) Setting

The physical environment of the role play was a coupling party (or a marriage meeting) where students (acting as party-goers) tried to find their future wife or husband. The classroom was transformed into a party hall with tables and chairs. The students talked to one another sitting on the chairs or standing.

##### (2) Role and status

Students were asked to act as imaginary characters who were looking for their future

wife or husband. The teacher provided the students with the character profiles of whom they were portraying. From the profile, each student gleaned his or her character's personal information such as name, address, age, nationality, occupation, and pastime likes and dislikes. As a prior task to practicing the role play, each student was required to build the character that would engage in verbal interaction to find his or her future partner.

At the beginning the role play, the students started speaking to other people at the party and tried to find out what kind of people they were (a temporary objective). Their utmost goal in interaction was to find their future wife or husband at the party (super objective). Setting up the purpose of the interaction certainly helped the students to generate their speech intent to convey what they wanted to say. Like actors in "Method" acting, the students tried to achieve their goal of finding their marriage partners by producing Japanese utterances. Since the purpose of their verbal exchanges at the party was clearly established, the students did not seem to be confused wondering what they could say at the beginning.

In the imaginary character profiles, the teacher deliberately created conflicts, which made it difficult for the students to find suitable matches for their marriages. For example, a character likes to do outdoor sports, while another likes to read books at home. The two speakers must experience the negotiation process of handling the discrepancies in their pastimes. The reason why the teacher created conflicts in the process of building characters was to let the students engage in exchanging their verbal thoughts or voices over the problems. The dramatic element of conflict produces subtext that the students want to communicate during the process of negotiations. Bringing diverse views and values into the process of verbal negotiations develops the students' imaginations and their own ideas in constructing speech intent. The conflicts in the negotiations generated the students' speech intent to produce Japanese utterances and heightened their motivation to reach a resolution.

### (3) Mood, attitude and feeling

The students were required to engage in interaction using Japanese honorifics to present themselves politely to other people since they were instructed to meet one another for the first time at the party. It necessitated them to speak to other people with honorifics since their goal was to find their future wife and husband. The use of honorifics and their emotional and motivational characteristics should coexist in communication.

## 5. Discussion and teacher's role

Most language teachers hesitate to use dramatic elements in role play as a pedagogical instrument because they tend to identify themselves as language teachers not as drama teachers. They often conclude to say that they cannot organize dramatic activities for role plays in class since they do not have knowledge of drama. However, it is unnecessary for them to have the knowledge of drama for practicing role play because the utmost goal of role play is not to present a dramatic performance in front of the audience as in drama class but to help language learners to enhance their speaking proficiency in the exchange of their voices. The goal of role play is not set on the result of performing but the process of developing speaking competence.

At the beginning of role play, language teachers provide students with the total situation of the context in which their role play takes place and create conflicts in the teachers' improvisational scripts from which the students engage in verbal exchanges. As directors in drama do, it is important for language teachers to create total situation in role play, directing the learners toward the attainment of their goals in interaction. The learners' goal is to convey their messages with appropriate linguistic competence in communication. The teachers should acknowledge that the learners possessed the speech intent to convey messages and the illocutionary force in their utterances was clearly defined.

It is essential to claim that three strata of cognitive shift (from object-, others- and to self-regulation) serve to elucidate the process of internalization of speech intent. There is an integrated model of role play supported by dramatic elements (total situation and "Method" acting), which can accommodate the process of internalization which occurs in the transformative shifts from inter-psychological to intra-psychological planes. In addition, the importance of explaining the internalization process resides in the fact that the speech intent of goal-oriented activities (objectives) in "Method" acting serves to facilitate speaking proficiency in the process of having exchanges. Creating conflicts in improvisational dialogues certainly help to generate speakers' voices in interaction. It is important to assert that language learners advance their speech voices for the purpose of achieving their goals in the dialogue.

## Notes

- 1) The role play was practiced in the class of Japanese level 4 (Lesson 19 "Honorific Verbs"), in March 2016, at Kansai Gaidai University.

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